

# Language champs

The infants at Waiwhetu kohanga reo can run conversational rings around university first-year maori language students according to linguist Lee Smith.

He has just completed an evaluation of their maori language skills.

Not only could the children reply to his questions in maori but they asked their own.

'When they start initiating conversation you know they're good,' he said.

'Conversationally they can ask you anything they want.

'But if that knowledge isn't developed I'm sure they'll lose it.'

The three star infants, all four years old, had an estimated maori vocabulary of 1000 words according to the results of the maori picture vocabulary test which measures oral comprehension and ability to discriminate between visual images.

All three had been speaking maori for less than two years.

## Report

Mr Smith, a Wellington Polytechnic maori language tutor with a masters degree in oceanic linguistics, was called in by Waiwhetu parents curious to know the amount of maori being learn-



Lee Smith

ed at the two-year-old centre, and to get an opinion about the resources and techniques used.

He spent two full days and two half days observing, testing, doing oral interviews and recording the 20 preschoolers with their supervisors (kaitiaki), parents and community people.

He said it was difficult to make comparisons with academic qualifications because the language nursery aimed at conversation not grammar, but the children's speech was well ahead of students at School Certificate and University Entrance, and first-year university level.

His report says the supervisor used an 'immersion' or 'audio-lingual' approach to learning maori, seeing themselves not as teachers but as creators of an environment in which everyday

language skills would be naturally and rapidly picked up.

The three, all experienced mothers, constantly invented interesting language activities including visits to the bush, the swimming pool, nights spent outdoors camping and regular physical education.

Routine, repetitive activities like road-crossing and meal preparation were used to consolidate language learning and the children had one formal learning session a day.

## Unit

The report says the best test of the children's language skills was spontaneous conversations.

The children spoke only maori when playing hide-and-seek, block building or sandpit games, encouraging each other and telling tales if english was spoken by one of the group.

In conclusion Mr Smith said any hesitation on the part of local schools to accommodate and build on the foundations being laid in language nurseries would be seen by maori people as a disguised form of the 'unofficial suppression' of New Zealand indigenous language which existed within the state education system up to the 1950s.

While a bilingual — maori/english — unit within Whaiwhetu Primary School was an obvious extension of the kohanga reo next year, by that time the precedent of an alternative maori school might already be established.

# Kohanga environment lacking

Henare Reriti, 5, was one of the star students at his Waiwhetu kohanga reo.

When he left to go to school at the beginning of the year he had a maori vocabulary estimated at 1000 words and could converse easily in maori and english.

His mother, Parekohai, a fluent speaker and supervisor at the language nursery, had seen him absorb the language — which her generation was punished for speaking — in less than two years.

Now she says, he is beginning to lose it.

'I regret sending him to school,' Parekohai said.

'He says he won't speak maori at school. The other kids tease him.'

She brings Henare back to the language nursery after school and speaks maori to him at home. But she says it is not enough.

She agrees with the other language nursery supervisors Makere and Wikitoria Ratu that the school is trying to help.

But she says the level of maori of the

teachers, at best, is only at the 'kia ora' and 'tena koe' stage which the language nursery graduates have long since passed.

The children are used to talking maori to their 'nannies' and each other for at least 40 hours a week.

The parents stress that they do not want the school to provide maori lessons from books — they want some of their children's classes to be taken in maori — a vitally important distinction.

In departmental jargon they want maori language to be the medium of instruction for one to three hours every day.

They want the school to employ a fluent maori speaker who would use that language to take all the bilingual children — and any others — for suitable scheduled activities like morning talks, nature study or physical education.

And they say that all the 'kohanga kids' must be kept together — another eight are due to go to school by the end of the year — as they will feel confident enough to converse in maori in the classroom and playground.



# KOHANGA REO